

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

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A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”
Psalm 23:4.*

Do you know I had laid this text by? I meant that this choice promise should be kept in store and stock till I came near the Jordan, and I hoped that then, in my last hours, I might be privileged to enjoy its sweetness and sing with joyful lips—

*“Yea, though I walk through death’s dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For You are with me, and Your rod
And staff comfort me still.”*

The other day I found that I needed to eat this heavenly loaf at once and I did so. Fathers tell their children, “You cannot have your cake and eat it, too,” but this rule does not hold good of the consolations of God. You can enjoy a promise and still have it. Yes, and all the more because your faith has fed upon its fatness; I got honey out of this verse some days ago when a tempest howled around me, but its sweetness is still there. I shall enjoy it, I doubt not, as I come near death’s gate, but I have had it already sealed to my own soul with richness and fullness of comfort by the blessed Spirit of our God. I pray to God that every believer who is burdened might find it as precious to his heart as I have found it to mine.

This verse is no doubt, very applicable to the experience of when he comes to die, but for certain, that is not its only intent. It has an inexpressibly delightful application to the dying, but it is for the living, too! And at this time if, through any peculiar trials, your heart is cast down within you and you are walking through the death-shade, I pray you to repeat the words of the text and may the Lord help you to feel that they are true—“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” The words are not in the future tense, and therefore are not reserved for a distant moment. Do not postpone to the future that which you so greatly need in the present!

Though I walk, even at this hour, through the dark valley, You, O Lord, are with me! Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. David was not dying—the psalm is full of happy, peaceful life. He is lying down in green pastures and following his Lord by still waters. And if a cloud has descended upon him, and he feels himself like one threatened with death, he nevertheless expects goodness and mercy to follow him through all his days. The song is not to lie upon the shelf till our last day, but is to be sung upon our stringed instruments all the days of our lives! Therefore let us sing it at this hallowed hour in the courts of the Lord’s house and in the midst of them that love Him!

I. I call your attention, first, to THE PASS AND ITS TERRORS—“The valley of the shadow of death.” Get the idea of a narrow ravine, something like the Gorge of Gondo or some other stern pass upon the higher Alps where the rocks seem piled to heaven and the sunlight is seen above as through a narrow rift. Troubles are sometimes heaped on one another, pile on pile, and the road is a dreary pass through which the pilgrim, on his journey to heaven, has to wend his way. Set before your mind’s eye a valley shut in with stupendous rocks that seem to meet overhead, a narrowing pass, dark as midnight itself. Through this valley, or rocky ravine, the heavenly footman has to follow the path appointed for him in the eternal purpose of the infinite mind. Through such a dreary rift many a child of God is making his way at this moment—and to him I speak.

Our first observation about it is that it is exceedingly gloomy. This is its chief characteristic. It is the valley of the shadow—the shadow of death. Death is terrible and the very shadow of it is cold and chill

and freezes to the marrow. I have stood under rocks which have not merely cooled me, but have cast a horribly damp chill as though the embrace of death had been about me and its cold within me. One hastens to escape from such a deadly shade which has tended to strike you with fever. And such, it seems to me, is the shade cast by the wings of death when the man feels that he is under such trouble that he cannot live and would not even wish to do so if he could. The joy of life has been like the sun under an eclipse and in the chill, dark, damp shade of a terrible sorrow the man has cowered down and beneath the icy touch of doubt has shivered, has felt fevered and frightened and has been as one out of his mind. I speak to some young hearts here who, I hope, know nothing about this gloom. Do not wish to know it! Keep bright while you can. Sing while you may. Be larks and mount aloft and sing as you mount! But there are some of God's people who are not much in the lark line—they are a great deal more like owls. They sit alone and keep silent. Or if they *do* open their mouths, it is to give forth a discontented hoot. Companions of dragons and very suitable companions, too, such mournful ones need all the gentle sympathy we can afford them. Even those who are bright and cheerful do, many of them, occasionally pass through the dreary glen where everything is doleful and their spirits sink below zero.

I know what wise brethren say, "You should not give way to feelings of depression." Quite right—we should no more. But we do. And perhaps when your brain is as weary as ours, you will not bear yourselves more bravely than we do. "But desponding people are very much to be blamed." I know they are, but they are also very much to be *pitied* and, perhaps, if those who blame quite so furiously could once *know* what depression is, they would think it cruel to scatter blame where *comfort* is needed. There are experiences of the children of God which are full of spiritual darkness and I am almost persuaded that those of God's servants who have been most highly favored have, nevertheless, suffered more times of darkness than others. The covenant is never known to Abraham so well as when a horror of great darkness comes over him and then he sees the shining lamp moving between the pieces of the sacrifice. A greater than Abraham was early led of the Spirit into the wilderness and yet, before He closed His life, He was sorrowful and very heavy in the garden. In this heaviness, for which there is a necessity, believers have a black foil which sets out the brightness of eternal love and faithfulness. Blessed be God for mountains of joy and valleys of peace and gardens of delight! But there is a valley of death-shade and most of us have traversed its tremendous glooms.

Moreover, there are parts of human life which are dangerous as well as gloomy. In journeying through the passes of the East, an escort is usually needed, for robbers lurk among the rocks and shoot down upon the traveler, or block up his way with sword and spear. The name of the Khyber Pass is still terrible in our memories and there are Khybers in most men's lives. There are points in human history that are especially dangerous. Oh, you that are beginners, I do not wish to frighten you! I do not want to tell you that the ways of wisdom are terrible, for they are not! No, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace." But, for all that, there are enemies on the road to heaven and there are, "Cut-throat Lanes" where, when the enemy finds your spirits cast down, he pounces upon you unawares with temptation—and before you know it you may be wounded and sorely grieved. There are spots in the valley of death-shade where every bush conceals an adversary; where temptations spring out of the very ground like the fiery serpents from among the desert sand; where the soul is among lions, even among them that are set on the fire of hell! If you have not yet come to that part of your pilgrimage, I am glad of it and I hope that you may be spared it, in answer to that needful prayer, "Lead us not into temptation." But if you are called to walk through this dangerous ravine, what will you do? Why, say this—"Yea, though I walk through that dangerous pass of which I have heard, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Remember that a Christian is never so much in danger from abundance of temptation as from the carnal security of his own heart. We are often most in jeopardy when we are *not* tempted—and the worst devil in the world may be no devil at all. "Deliver me," said a man of great experience, "from a *sleeping* devil, for if he roars at me, he keeps me awake. But when he leaves me alone, then my heart presumes that all is safe and I am betrayed." You young people, or old people, too, who are placed, in the course of providence, in positions of great trial and temptation need not wish for an easier pathway, for it may be that you are safer now, being on your guard, than those who are not fiercely tried, but sit at ease and are in great peril from sloth and spiritual indifference. Better consume with fire than perish of dry rot!

The cold mountains of trial are far safer than the sultry plains of pleasure. I am not, therefore, alarmed at manifest danger—neither would I have you greatly dismayed because there is a gloomy gorge between you and heaven. One of the chief reasons of the gloom is the fact that this terrible pass is shrouded in mystery. You do not know what the sorrow is. The shadow—the shadow of death—what does it mean? You cannot discern the form which broods over you. You cannot grasp the foe. It is of no use drawing a sword against a shadow! Bunyan represents the pilgrim as putting up his sword when he came into the valley of the shadow of death. He had fought Apollyon with it, but when he came into the midnight of that horrible valley, it was of no use to him. Everything was so veiled, magnified and blackened in the dark.

Hob-goblin as he called them hovered around—strange shapes and singular forms of doubts which he could not meet with reasoning or overcome with argument. A man can pluck up courage against a thing he knows, but an evil which he does not know unmans him! He does not know what the trial is and yet a strange, joy-killing feeling is upon him. He cannot see the extent of his loss in business, but he fears that his all will go—he does not know the end of his child's illness, but death appears to be threatening. All is suspense and surmise and the evil of evils is uncertainty. That which frightened Belshazzar when the handwriting was on the wall was, no doubt, that he could see the hand, but he could not see the arm and the body to which the hand belonged. It seemed so singular to see the mystic handwriting in letters of lightning and no more! So, sometimes, it seems to us as if we could not make out our condition—could not understand God's dealings with us. We have seemed to be at cross-purposes with providence. We have come to a place where two seas meet and we cannot understand the current. Our temptation has been comparable to a cyclone and we do not know which way the hurricane is sweeping—we are in the power of a whirlwind, jerked to and fro.

Such things happen to God's people now and then. And what are they to do when they get into these perplexities, these mysterious troubles that they cannot at all describe? They must do—and God help them to do—as this blessed man did, who in the peace and confidence of faith went on his way *singing*—Yea, though I walk through the valley shaded by the mysterious wings of death and though I know nothing of my way and cannot understand it, yet will I fear no evil, for You are with me. You know the way that I take. There are no mysteries with my God. You have the thread of this labyrinth and You will surely lead me through. Why, therefore, should I fear? Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me! Gloom, danger, mystery—these three all vanish when faith lights up her heavenly lamp, trimmed with the golden oil of the promise. Nor is this all; the idea of solitude is in the text. The path is lonely and the pilgrim sings, “Yea, though I walk”—as if he walked alone, no one sharing his shadowed pathway! Solitude is a very great trial to some spirits and some of us know a great deal of what it means, for we dwell alone, in a *spiritual* sense. But you will say, “Do you not mingle with crowds?” Yes, and there is no solitude like it. When your office and position set you as on a mountain all alone, you will know what I mean. For the sheep, there are many companions, but for the shepherd few.

Those who watch for souls come into positions in which they are divided from all human help. Nobody knows your cares or can guess the burden of your soul. And those who try to sympathize with you fail in the generous attempt. Some of you, perhaps, are in a position in which you complain, “Nobody was ever tried as I am. I feel as if God had set me as a mark for His arrows.” Or possibly you murmur, “There may be many more afflicted than I, but none in my peculiar way. I suffer a singularity of trial.” Just so and that is an essential part of the bitterness of your cup—that you should lament that you are alone. But will you not say, with your divine Master, “You shall leave me alone and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me”? Now is the time for *faith*. When you trust God and a friend, there is a question whether it is God you trust or the friend. But when the friend has left you and only God is near, no question remains. If you and I are walking together and a dog follows us, who knows which is the dog's master? But when you go off to the left and I turn to the right, all men will see which one of us owns the dog by seeing which he follows! If you can trust in God alone, then are you really trusting Him! And if, when creature streams run dry, you can stoop down to the Creator's overflowing well and drink there, then you are a believer and there is no mistake about it. It is profitable to be driven into loneliness that we may prove whether we are solely trusting in God or not. It is a bad thing to be standing with one foot on the sea and the other on the land. An angel stood in that fashion and it suits an-

gels—but it is not a safe posture for such burdened beings as men and women! We must get both feet on the Rock of Ages, or the foot which stands upon the sea of changeable self will be our downfall. My soul, wait only upon God! When faith's *only* foundation is the power and faithfulness of the Lord, she learns to glory in the absence of all visible help and sings with joyful heart—"Yea, though I walk through death's dark valley, unattended by human companion, I will fear no evil, for my God is near!"

Let me remark, further, that though this valley is thus gloomy, dangerous, mysterious and solitary, yet it is often traversed. Many more go by this road than some people dream. Among those who wear a cheerful countenance in public there are many who are well acquainted with this dreary valley—they have passed through it often—and may be in it now. When I wear the sackcloth of sorrow, I try to bind it about my loins *under* my outer garments and not where all shall see it, for has not the Master said, "You, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face that you appear not unto men to fast"? Why should we cast others down? There is enough sorrow in the world without our spreading the infection by publishing our troubles. Storybooks are sent me to review and when I perceive that they contain harrowing tales of poverty, I make short work of them. I see quite enough of sorrow in *real* life—I do not need fiction to fret my heart. If men and women must write works of fiction, they might as well write cheerfully, and not break people's hearts over mere fabrications. If I must weep, let it be over an actual grief and not over a painted affliction. But so it is—some like to tell the story of their sorrows and care little what may be the influence upon others—they might have a little more consideration for their fellow man. If my own heart is bleeding, why should I wound others? Sometimes it is brave to be speechless, even as the singer puts it—

***"Bear and forbear, and silent be.
Tell no man your misery."***

It is surely true that a great number of God's best servants have trod the deeps of the Valley of the Shadow and this ought to comfort some of you. The footsteps of the holy are in the Valley of Weeping. Saints have marched through the Via Dolorosa—do you not see their footprints? Above all others mark one footstep! Do you not see it? Stoop down and fix your gaze upon it! Go on your knees and view it! If you watch it well, you will observe the print of a nail. As surely as this Word of God is true, your Lord has felt the chill of the death-shade. There is no gloom of spirit, apart from the sin of it, into which Jesus has not fallen! There is no trouble of soul, or turmoil of heart which is free from sin, which the Lord has not known. He says, "Reproach has broken My heart and I am full of heaviness." The footprint of the Lord of life is set in the rock forever, even in the valley of the shadow of death! Shall we not cheerfully advance to the cross and death of Jerusalem when Jesus goes before us? I shall close my remarks upon this Via Mala of terrors by showing that dark and gloomy as it is, it is not an unhallowed pathway. No sin is necessarily connected with sorrow of heart, for Jesus Christ our Lord once said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even unto death." There was no sin in Him, and consequently, none in His deep depression! We have never known a joy or a sorrow altogether untainted with evil, but in grief, itself, there is no necessary cause of sin. A man may be as happy as all the birds in the air and there may be no sin in his happiness. And a man may be exceedingly heavy and yet there may be no sin in the heaviness. I do not say that there is not sin in all our feelings, but still, the feelings in themselves need not be sinful!

I would, therefore, try to cheer any brothers and sisters who are sad, for their sadness is not necessarily blameworthy. If their downcast spirit arises from unbelief, let them flog themselves and cry to God to be delivered from it. But if the soul is sighing, "Though He slays me, yet will I trust in Him," its being slain is not a fault. If the man cries, "My God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore will I remember You," his soul's being cast down within him is no sin. "If need be," says the apostle, "you are in heaviness through manifold temptations." Not only, "If need be you are in the temptations," but, "you are in *heaviness* through them." There is a necessity for the heartbreak, for it is in the heaviness of the spirit that the essence of the trial is found. Does not Solomon say, "The blueness of a wound cleans away evil"? If the blow is not such as to leave its bruise, there has been no chastening that will do us good. Heaviness of spirit is not, therefore on every occasion, a matter for which we need condemn ourselves though it will be well, always, to turn a severe side to yourself. However we may censure ourselves for heart sorrow, we must be careful not to condemn others—for the way of sorrow is not the way of sin, but a hallowed road sanctified by the praying of myriads of pilgrims now with God—pilgrims

who, passing through the valley of Baca made it a well, the rain also filled the pools. Of such it is written, “They go from strength to strength; every one of them in Zion appears before God.”

II. Our second head, upon which we shall speak for a little while, is THE PILGRIM AND HIS PROGRESS. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The pilgrim, you observe, first, is calm in the prospect of his dreary passage. I do not think that it is one-half so hard to bear a trouble as it is to think of it beforehand. The poet well said that many of us—

“Feel a thousand deaths in fearing one.”

The outriders of trouble are often of a fiercer countenance than the trouble itself. We suffer more in the dread of something than in the endurance of the stroke. Here we have a man of faith who is calm in expectancy of trouble—“I shall walk,” says he, “through the valley of the shadow of death. I expect to do so, but I will fear no evil.”

Have you my friend trouble evidently drawing near to you? Are there tokens of a storm all around you? Then look bravely at the future! Let not your heart fail you while waiting for the thunder and the hurricane. David said, “Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.” Encamped enemies generally trouble us more than actually contending foes. When once the enemy raises the war cry and comes on, we are awakened to valor and meet him, foot to foot. But while he tarries and holds us in suspense, our heart is apt to eat into itself with perplexity. We can see that our deadly foe is in his camp, but we do not know whether he will attack us at the middle watch of the night, or at the dawn of the day. We do not know when his onslaught will be—this suspense distresses the soul and, therefore, the glory of a faith that can say—“Though I know that I shall soon suffer, yet in the prospect of it I am at rest. I fear no evil.” Beloved, pray to be calm in the prospect of trial—it is half the battle! Is it not written of the believer, “He shall not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord”? Furthermore, the pilgrim is steady in his progress. “Yea, though I walk through the valley,” he says. He does not run in haste. He walks quietly along.

We are generally in a hurry to get our trouble over, like those who say, “If medicine must be taken, let it be taken as soon as possible.” There is a season for all things. Let us wait till the trouble comes from the hand of the Lord, for He will time it to the second. “There! I must know the worst of it,” cries one. “I feel in such a horrible state of suspense that I must end it one way or another.” But, my dear friend, faith is not in such a frightful bustle—“He that believes shall not make haste.” faith is quick when it has to serve God, but it is patient when it has to wait for Him. There is no hurry about the psalmist, “Yea, though, I walk” he says—quietly, calmly, steadily. The pace of the experienced man of God is a walk. Young people fly—“they shall mount up with wings as eagles.” Growing men “run and are not weary.” But when a man of God becomes a father in the church and is endowed with abounding strength, he walks and does not faint. Walking is the regulation pace for veteran soldiers of Christ—all the rest is for the raw recruits! So David, in effect, declares—I shall walk through the valley of the shadow of death as quietly as I walk my garden in the evening, or go down the street about my business. My affliction does not unfit me for duty. I am not flurried and worried about it. May God give you, my dear brothers and sisters, this calm faith. I pray that He may give it to me, for I greatly need it. I have often confessed my need of it and confessed it with shame and confusion of face, for I serve a blessed Master and I ought never to fear, nor allow pain of body to produce trembling of heart. O sacred Comforter, shed abroad in my heart the peace of God!

The next point about the pilgrim’s progress is that he is secure in his expectancy. “Yea, though I walk through the valley.” There is a bright side to that word, “through.” He expects to come out of the dreary pass to a brighter country! Just as the train of his life enters into the dark tunnel of tribulation, he says within himself, “I shall come out on the other side. It may be very dark and I may go through the very bowels of the earth, but I am bound to come out on the other side.” So is it with every child of God. If his way to heaven should lie over the bottom of the sea, hard by the roots of the mountains where the earth, with her bars, is about him, he will traverse the road in perfect safety. Jonah’s road to heaven lay that way and a special conveyance was started for him—“The Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.”

I do not suppose there was ever any other fish of the sort. Naturalists cannot find such a whale, they say, nor need they look for it, for the Scripture says, “The Lord *prepared* a fish.” He knew how to make it to hold Jonah and the fish accommodated its passenger and brought him right to shore. Providence makes special preparation for every tried saint. If you are God’s servant and are called to a very peculiar trial, some singular providence, the like of which you have never read of, shall certainly happen to you to illustrate in your case the divine goodness and faithfulness! Oh, if we had more faith! Oh, if we had more faith, life would be happy, trials would be light! Brethren, is it not an easy thing to walk through a shadow? If you get up in the morning and saunter down the field and the spiders have spun their cobwebs across the path in a thousand places, you brush them all away—and yet there is more strength in a cobweb than in a shadow!

The psalmist speaks without fear, for he regards his expected trials as walking through a *shadow*. Trials and troubles, if we have but faith, are mere shadows that cannot hinder us on our road to heaven. Sometimes God so overrules afflictions that they even *help* us on to glory! Therefore let us walk on and never be afraid. Let us be sure that if we walk in at one end of the hollow way of affliction, we shall walk out at the other. Who shall hinder us when God is with us? The main point about this pilgrim and his progress is that he is perfectly innocent of fear. He says, “I shall fear no evil.” It is beautiful to see a child at perfect peace amid dangers which alarm all those who are with him. I have read of a little boy who was on board a vessel that was being buffeted by the tempest and everybody was distressed, knowing that the ship was in great peril.

There was not a sailor on board, and certainly not a passenger, who was not full of fear. This boy, however, was perfectly happy and was rather amused than alarmed by the tossing of the ship. They asked him why he was so happy at such a time. “Well,” he said, “my father is the captain. He knows how to manage.” He did not think it possible that the ship could go down while his father was in command! There was folly in such confidence, but there will be none in yours if you believe with an equally unqualified faith in *your* Father who can and will bring safely into port every vessel that is committed to His charge! Rest in God and be quiet from fear of evil! This pilgrim, while he is thus free from fear, is not at all fanatical or ignorant since he gives a good reason for his freedom from alarm. “I will fear no evil,” says he, “for You are with me.”

Was there ever a better reason given under heaven for being fearless than this—that *God* is with us? He is on our side! He is pledged to help us! He has never failed us. He must cease to be what He is before He can cast away one soul that trusts Him. Where, then, is there room for terror? The child is confident because his mother is with him—much more should we be serene in heart since the omniscient, the omnipotent, the immutable God is on our side! “Whom shall I fear?” Whom shall we select to honor with our dread? Is there anybody that we need to fear? “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns?” Christ has died and risen again and sits up yonder at the right hand of God as our representative—who, then, can harm us? Let the heavens be dissolved and the earth be melted with fervent heat, but let not the Christian’s heart be moved! Let him stand like the great mountains whose foundations are confirmed forever, for the Lord God will not forsake His people or break His covenant. “I will fear no evil, for You are with me.”

There is something more, here, than freedom from fear and a substantial reason for it, for the true believer rejoices in exalted companionship. “You are with me.” You—You, You—the King of kings, before whom every seraph veils his face, abashed before the awful majesty of his Maker. “You are with me.” You before whom the greatest of the great sink into utter insignificance—YOU are with me! How brave that man ought to be who walks with the lion of the tribe of Judah as his guard! What steady footsteps should that man take who treads upon a rock and knows it. “You are with me.” Trembling brother, you would feel perfectly safe if you had your eyes opened to see the companies of angels that surround you. You would rejoice in your security if you saw horses of fire and chariots of fire encompassing you. But such defenses are as nothing compared with those which are always around you! God is better than myriads of chariots! “The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels,” but the glory of it is that, “God is among them as in Sinai.” God is with every one of His children! We dwell *in* Him and He dwells in *us*. “I in them and they in Me,” says Christ. A vital, everlasting union exists between

every believing soul and God—then what cause can there be for fear? “You are with me.” Oh for grace to be brave pilgrims and to make steady progress with heavenly company as our glory and defense!

III. Now, I shall close with my third head, which is most evidently in the text—THE SOUL AND ITS SHEPHERD—for David says, “Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” You see the psalm is all about a shepherd and a soul that feels itself to be like a sheep. The rod and staff, the tokens of shepherdry, are the comforts of the saints. What are the uses of the rod and staff? Consider, first, that the rod was used for numbering the sheep. “Then shall the sheep pass, again, under the hand of him that counts them.” The shepherd holds his rod and the sheep are counted as they pass under it.

It is a very blessed thing when the soul can say, “The Lord counts me one of His. I am in the valley of the shadow of death, but I am one of the Lord’s own purchased flock. I am in great sadness, but I am numbered with His redeemed.” The Good Shepherd keeps all His sheep and He will preserve them in the gloomy valley. “The Lord knows them that are His.” And the Lord will show Himself strong on behalf of His own. He says, “I give unto My sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of My hand.” If He numbers me among His own, though I am the meanest of them and the feeblest in faith and lowest in grace, yet He will protect me! Since I can say, My Beloved is mine, and I am His, I am sure of every good thing! We need no better comfort, for when His disciples rejoiced because the devils were subject unto them, their Master said, “Nevertheless, rejoice not in this, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” If with His rod, the Shepherd of Israel has pointed you out as His own, you may well be of good cheer, for the Lord will not lose one part of His portion, nor suffer the enemy to devour one of His flock.

Next, the rod is used for rule. The shepherd’s crook, which is now put into the hand of a bishop to show that he ought to be a shepherd, is the emblem of power and government. The shepherd is not only the keeper, but the lord of the sheep. Remember that your Savior is your sovereign. You call Him Master and Lord and you say well. Do you feel the spirit of obedience? I trust I do, for I long to serve Him. I am not what I ought to be, nor what I want to be, but my heart longs to obey His will. I accept His law to be my law and I wish always to be one of His most loyal subjects. I delight to think that the Lord reigns. It is a part of my song—“The Lord is King.” My heart shouts it! I would proclaim it at the market of every town! Let Jesus Christ reign and reign forever and ever. The joy is that He does reign! His rod and staff are the emblems of the Shepherd-King and as we submit to His supreme sway, we find a comfort in His royal power and dignity.

A third meaning, for the words are very full of doctrine—is this—the rod and staff are meant for guidance. It is with his rod that the shepherd leads his flock. It is most sweet, most comfortable to believe that the Lord is guiding us. “You shall guide me with Your counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.” We are not half awake as the sheep of Christ, but if we were to watch our Lord, we should see Him gently leading His by a right way. When we are not willful, but wait upon Him, He leads us on in a way which we should not have chosen of our own accord—but it is the safe and right way. When we do not know which road to take, we are not left to make a foolish choice, but we hear a voice behind us saying, “This is the way, walk in it.” It is a blessed thing, when we are in a troubled condition, to be quite confident that the Lord, Himself, brought us there, for then we are sure that the road must be right, since our Shepherd never misleads His flock. If we follow where Jesus leads, the Guide is responsible for the road.

The next meaning of the rod and staff is that of urging onward. The sheep, sometimes, are lazy and will not stir. And then the shepherd pushes them on, a bit, with his rod and staff. Have you ever felt the divine nudging? Perhaps in a sermon you have had a pretty sharp thrust. I know I have had to lay on the rod, at times, in the Master’s name, upon certain fat sheep who are not quite as nimble as they ought to be. But their wool is so thick that I can scarcely make them feel! The Great Shepherd knows how to touch them. He can give such a push, when sheep are lingering behind, that all of a sudden you see them leap forward and you wonder how it is that they go to the front so eagerly! If I am troubled and I feel that it speeds me on in the right road—if it drives me to prayer, if it makes me honor God more—then the rod and staff comfort me. It is a happy thing to be afflicted towards heaven! It is an evil thing to be comfortable in doing nothing—a horrible thing to be sinking into indifference and not to care whether you get out of it or not. But it is good to be tried and so made earnest for more divine grace. It comforts

a wise man to perceive that the rod is working for his good. The rod and staff mean chastisement, for if a sheep goes astray, the shepherd pulls it back by the leg with his crook and makes it feel that it cannot wander without suffering for it. So does the Lord chasten us. Blessed be His name for chastening, though it is not joyous but grievous, “nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them which are exercised thereby.”

Oh, how blessed are those words, “Nevertheless, afterward!” It is a condescending thing for God to take enough notice of you to chasten you! A man does not whip other people’s children and when God afflicts a believer and his soul within him is broken down, let him say within himself, “blessed be God for this tribulation! Whom He loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives.” Sweet is the pain that seals the Father’s love! Blessed is the anguish caused by our Shepherd’s hand! Oh, dreadful pleasure that would arise out of God’s letting me alone, to never taste it! But blessed grief, blessed heartbreak which assures me that God has not forgotten me! O Lord, Your rod, when it chastens me, does comfort me!

But, last of all, the rod and the staff are used by the shepherd to protect his flock. With these he contends against the beasts of the field that the lambs may not be torn apart. And, oh, how glorious is Christ when He comes forth with the weapons of His eternal power to fight the lion that would tear our soul! Think of Him in heaven pleading for His people, pleading the merits of His blood, using His intercession as a staff with which He smites the wolf and chases away the lion and the bear so that not one of us may be destroyed! He must, He will protect His own elect! You may think that Christ bought His people with His blood and that He will lose them, but I do not believe it. When a thing has cost you dearly, you take great care of it—and if it cost you your life—you would not readily part with it. “Skin for skin, yes, all that a man has, will he give for his life.” And when he has once given up his life, that which he has purchased with it is dearer to him than the entire world; Christ would sooner lose His life than lose His people! He died once to save them, and until He dies again they shall never perish! Has He not said it Himself, “Because I live you shall live, also”? Unless they live, He does not live! His life has entered into them and it can never leave them. “I give,” says He, “unto My sheep eternal life.” And what can, “eternal life,” mean but a life which lasts forever? Oh, may God give to everyone here the faith which I have been talking about!

Perhaps some of you have never trusted your souls with Christ. You know that faith is the way of salvation—why do you not follow it? Simply trust Him. Simply trust Him. Simply trust Him now! It is wonderful, the power of faith to change the heart! When you trust a man, you love him. You cannot be an enemy to a man in whom you trust. The effect of faith upon the affections is marvelous—it changes their whole nature and bent. God give you to know Christ, for they who know His name will put their trust in Him, and when you know Him and trust Him, then shall you confess with us unto the Lord, “Blessed is the man who trusts in You.” God bless you, dear friends, for Christ’s sake. Amen.

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